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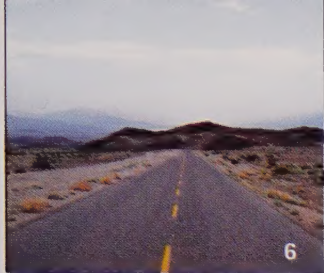
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OUTRAGEOUS GENEROSITY

Have you ever received a gift beyond your wildest expectations when you least expected it? Have you ever recovered something dear to you that you thought was gone forever? Elements of our relationship with God are captured in these experiences. How can we respond to God's generosity and live up to our end of the Great Commission?

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Lost and Found

by Nancy Goldberger

I SAT IN MY CAR STARING AT THE PIECE OF PAPER IN MY HAND. When I dropped my daughter off at preschool that morning, there was a note from the school's director taped to her locker. The note was printed on bright yellow paper, but its contents were anything but cheerful. It read: "This Friday, we will be conducting our first lockdown drill of the year." The note explained that during this safety drill, teachers would collect the children, close the classroom door, turn off the lights, and move to an area of the room not visible from the door. The building would be locked up tight and no one would be allowed in or out. There is little mystery about why such drills have been developed and are practiced.

Having been a teacher earlier in my career, I understood completely the need to have a plan and to rehearse it. It makes good sense; only a fool would not prepare for any possible situation, especially when you are responsible for the safety of others.

I was working on my master's degree in higher education when two teens went crashing into Columbine High School and vented their rage at teachers and students in a blaze of bullets a few years ago. We spent a good deal of time studying the impact of this horrible event on other students across the nation. Last year, when an elementary school in Russia was stormed by terrorist gunmen, we again grieved the senseless tragedy and loss of young life.

As I sat in my car holding the lockdown notice in my hand that morning, I thought of these incidents again. As a first-time parent, the realities of the world my three year old lives in came crashing down on me. For a moment I wondered if I should go back inside and take her home. How could she possibly deal with the thought that someone might come into her school with the sole intent of causing her and others harm? How could I?

Knowing I cannot shield her from harsh realities, I decided to go to work as usual. But I was keenly aware we had both just lost something. Another little piece of my optimistic nature had been chipped away, and her growing picture of the world was about to be stained in a way that could not be removed.

My little girl was learning lessons I would prefer she would not have to learn. But it would be irresponsible to pretend that such violence does not exist. Of course we need to prepare. But it makes it all that much more important to ensure that we do not lose sight of all that we have. I can affirm for my daughter that she lives with a loving family who will do their best to take care of her. I can make sure she knows that in good times and in challenging times, God never leaves our side. We can mourn what we have lost to earthly sinfulness, but we cannot forget to celebrate what we have found in our Savior's promise of eternal life.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Still Souls and Faithfulness

by Marj Leegard

Be still, my soul, the Lord is on your side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain; leave to your God to order and provide; in every change God faithful will remain. (Moravian Book of Worship, 1995, p. 757)

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE WE SUNG WORDS LIKE THAT, CONFIDENT THAT WE HAVE MASTERED THE teaching? And how many times has disaster struck, forcing us into a dark place of disbelief, distrust, and despair—a place of no stillness?

Once my pastor preached about Abraham and the test he faced. Abraham was willing to give up his son, and I listened in tears because I was not willing to give up my daughter. Not then. Not ever. As I shook my pastor's hand at the door, I said, "I failed the test." When we were back home, the telephone rang and it was our pastor. He simply said, "That wasn't the final, Marj."

I sometimes think God has a classroom of pupils who are slow to learn. I must take my place in that group. Over and over I hear about trust and faith, and on ordinary days, I am a brilliant student. But let my soul be troubled, and I am once again questioning, demanding, and shaking. The teachings desert me. I must hear again that God will remain faithful. And I am not alone in my need for repetition.

I attended a meeting of Sunday school teachers once, and the discussion about the value of memorization was lively. The leader acknowledged that memory work was far down on the list of desirable learning styles when he was a child. But

his attitude had matured. To show us, he quoted these words: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth," and then asked us what they meant. For a few minutes, there was silence among the group of faithful old teachers. Then the explanation began and swelled into a joyful chorus. The words were difficult to remember when we were 15 years old in catechism class and even more difficult to understand. But now they were surrounded by years of testing, days of tears, and life around and under and between.

Listening to sermons when we are old could be like these words. The teaching should be indelible because we have been through the cycle so often. And yet each sermon is different because we are different and our understanding changes and grows. And in all the change one thing remains. God is there with us. God will bear the cross of grief or pain.

I am glad the hymn writer did not tell us to still ourselves or our voices or our doubts. Every cell of our bodies might be overwhelmed with grief, but God reigns in one place. God stills our souls. And when our souls are still, we can ask God to order and to provide. We cannot do it alone. God is faithful.

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



When Daniel, a parishioner in our church, unexpectedly lost his engineering job after years of hard work and company loyalty, he felt disappointed, but not particularly threatened. After all, he had security in the company stocks he owned, and he had exceptional professional skills. He should have no trouble finding another job. However, the terrorist attacks in September 2001 changed everything. Not only did

stocks plummet, but the job market also shriveled. Daniel and his wife, Elizabeth, had three children approaching or in college, and their financial future looked very bleak.

As their situation became more challenging, tension within the family grew. Daniel mourned not working and wrestled with feelings of failure as the family breadwinner. Elizabeth struggled with how to console her husband,

how to adjust to a scaled-down lifestyle, and where to look for work to help the family meet its financial demands. Both were exhausted from simply trying to make ends meet.

It was hard enough for Daniel and Elizabeth to talk about their finances and how they probably would be forced to sell their home, but it was even more difficult to talk about their personal feelings—the hurt, anger, resentment, sadness,

PATHS OF TRANSFORMATION AND CHALLENGE

by Beth Marie Halvorsen

In our journeys of faith, God promises us a transformed life, but not necessarily an easy or comfortable one. Jesus used parables to make people think about life situations in new ways. His New Testament stories can tease us into active thought—into transformation that requires us to make decisions. Jesus empowers us to think, assume responsibility, and respond with action, and **he offers us maturity, courage, and grace to handle loss, change, and growth.**

and fear they were experiencing. At this low point in their lives, it was even difficult to express appreciation, support, and love for each other.

Another example of transformation through loss involves one of my good friends. Jill has learned we must create new dreams when we encounter loss. She has experienced loss with the death of a mother, divorce, and the inability to give birth to children. She

certainly struggled to accept these losses and changes, but she experienced transformation because of them. Her healing began when she gave herself time to mourn and when she became more attentive to the present moment.

ASKING TOUGH QUESTIONS

To become more personally engaged in the process of loss and transformation, we have to ask ourselves tough questions. This

forces us to name our present situation, explore our values, and determine what to do next. Such questions might include ones like “What am I grateful for? Is this a situation I can change? How might God be at work here? Which of my core beliefs or values is rising to the top? Is God calling me to grow?”

Loss is difficult to define, my friend Jill said, explaining that she experienced it in stages. For

example, the first big loss of her father took her through three years of grieving. First came total denial that he was gone, next she dreamed at night he was still in her life, then she slowly accepted his absence. The next series of stages in the loss of her father came when she realized that he would not be a part of the significant events in her life. With each realization, she said, she felt like she was opening the wounds of his loss all over again.

With each loss, Jill said she naturally had to change. Her sense of purpose was transformed by the people who were in her life at the time—the people who encouraged her to focus on the present moment. Jill asked herself, “What am I going to do or be to have a meaningful life?”

Elizabeth and Daniel also assessed their situation and asked tough questions about what needed to be done. When they decided to sell their house and give up some of their belongings, they discovered that their home was defined by relationships, not by size, cost, location, or the furniture that filled it.

The couple asked themselves questions about what gave them happiness and hope. Daniel, who had considered teaching school when he retired, decided to claim

his dream sooner than he originally expected. In a leap of faith, he stopped applying for engineering jobs, went back to school, worked as many as four part-time jobs at once, and eventually accepted a teaching position in a high school 45 miles away.

Elizabeth took a job in an office. As she developed her skills in new ways, she earned accolades and was given increased responsibilities. Her self-respect improved as well. However, with Elizabeth no longer at home full time, the rest of the family was forced to learn how to help around the house. These changes did not always go smoothly, but the family knew they had to work together to make the lifestyle change successful.

Daniel, Elizabeth, and their children lost a lot in this process of transformation—a larger income and personal savings, a spacious home, vacations, and the freedom to spend money indiscriminately. They lost a certain identity and status within this materialistic and achievement-oriented culture. They faced a loss of security about the future because they were in a position they had never dreamed possible. As such, the couple had to contend with fear in charting new courses, uncertainty about the outcome, cynicism regarding the ways of the world, and questions

about God. At times, the chaotic insecurity seemed never ending.

REMAINING FAITHFUL

It can be extremely difficult to face the uncertain personal issues, conflicted feelings, and strange family dynamics that accompany such drastic changes. Though change is always certain, the outcome of it is not.

The challenge for Elizabeth and Daniel was to remain faithful and open in the chaos so that new possibilities could surface. During times of transition, it is essential to remember our values and visions so we can move more easily toward the future God intends for us. Spiritual disciplines can help us with our discernment. Prayer, study, and meditation are all good gifts of God.

Despite all that was lost and mourned, certain values continued to guide the couple through darkness toward light. Faith remained a stronghold for Daniel and Elizabeth though sometimes they wondered about God's presence. They questioned, but persevered; wondered, but continued to trust; anguished, but continued to hope. The couple felt that God would point them in a new direction not yet unknown. With part of their old identity shattered, they clung more closely to their identity as

God's beloved, forgiven, equipped, and called children. And they sought to shape their hopes accordingly.

They remained committed to worship, education, fellowship, and service. Daniel read Scripture and offered prayers during worship, and he taught adult education classes. The family served by assisting people with house moves, offering a listening ear, making phone calls, and other thoughtful gestures.

Likewise, Jill found great joy in pursuing her transformation through reading, talking with family and friends, participating in group therapy, sketching, painting, and, most importantly, learning to give to others. Through loss and change, she grew more flexible and discovered new opportunities. She gave her time and talents to help others, finding that offered her more fantastic experiences than she could have imagined or dreamed. As Jill became more conscious of trusting in God absolutely, she said she could not have planned a more interesting and fulfilling life.

Elizabeth and Daniel also maintained a commitment to relationships. Both Daniel and Elizabeth discovered that their true friends came from the church community. They especially honored their own marriage. Like both

sets of their parents who had faced and endured difficult times, the couple took their wedding vows seriously. They held fast to their commitment and love for one another.

Though their children were sometimes worried and frustrated about all the changes they were enduring, each one displayed an incredible maturity and stability through the years. Part of that came from the fact that their parents were committed to providing them quality education and worthwhile experiences. Elizabeth and Daniel had to let go of giving their children material goods they really didn't need. Yet they were committed to providing them with events that were important to shaping their faith, community, and passions. They researched scholarship applications together. And when needed, they took on extra jobs, borrowed money, and juggled finances to make sure their children were able to attend college and special church events.

LESSONS LEARNED

In this process of loss, change, and growth, Daniel, Elizabeth, and Jill learned that personal struggles can bring the promise of new life. All were forced to ask themselves tough questions, look more closely at their priorities, make serious

choices, mourn their losses, and then grow from their situation of loss. They learned that new life is realized through maturity, courage, faith, and grace. They learned how to handle life when they were grieving, exhausted, or stressed. God showed them all strength they didn't realize they had. Eventually, they more fully realized that God had been present throughout their struggles.

Some transformation processes can be likened to death, and emerging from them is similar to moving through the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Whether the change is joyful or sorrowful, that which is no longer relevant or helpful must die. Death to unhealthy emotional relationships, death to unrealizable dreams, or death to material attachments are losses with which we must deal.

As we begin to understand how our losses can lead to life changes, let us pray to remain faithful in the knowledge that God has a grace-filled plan for each and every one of us.

Beth Marie Halvorsen is a pastor at Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas. She and her husband, Russell, have an 11-year-old daughter, Sarah.



Boundless Love: Embracing the Sacrifices

by Elizabeth Hunter

FEAR AND AWE KEPT ME AWAKE THAT FIRST NIGHT HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL. I COULDN'T BELIEVE THEY LET US LEAVE THE MATERNITY WARD. WE HAD no idea what we were doing. I was supposed to be resting, letting my husband, Leslie, sit up and watch our newborn son, Evan. But all night I lay awake, listening to those soft, reassuring whuffles, thinking: He's breathing.

When adrenaline pushed me from the bed, a stumbling, milky mess, I peered closely at Evan's little belly, reassured by its gentle rise and fall. He uttered a tearless cry, and I gratefully fed him.

Some of the things I'd thought I'd wanted to do were no longer relevant. Having a child means giving up some options. But some other things I'd lost sight of over the years were suddenly in focus. There's this line from a movie called *The Rookie* that I like: "It's okay to think about what you want to do until it's time to start doing what you were meant to do."

I'd been floundering for a while, spreading myself thin between work, school, home, and church, wavering on the brink of decisions, fearing to commit too deeply to any path. It's funny that

motherhood would bring about more clarity. I don't think it's a betrayal of my feminist roots to say that being a mother made me more of who I was created to be. For me, motherhood seems to be what God is using to wake me up to life. What I once worked for—recognition, respect, financial security, being right—fell by the wayside when I became a mother. Where I once pondered the meaning of life, now it was all I could do to simply live.

In between diapers, feedings, chores, maintaining a marriage, and working, I only had time left over to do what I love. Realizing that I had the skills to teach, but not the burning desire, I quit graduate school. This time, I signed up for church committees where I could give more, joyfully, without resentment. Admitting to myself that writing was like breathing for me, I began to write again in my free time, forming a writers' group with a gifted friend who encourages me when I'm tempted to throw in the towel. Outside of these activities, I focused on my family, giving my all. Sometimes I wake up so tired it's like I never went to sleep. But life is somehow more complete.



"So much of my life centers on my son, Evan, that it's a bit unnerving to know that he will one day leave us. He's already begun the process in small ways, starting with the moment when that strangely tough and rubbery cord between us was clamped and cut. It was not the easiest start."

So much of my life centers on my son, Evan, that it's a bit unnerving to know that he will one day leave us. He's already begun the process in small ways, starting with the moment when that strangely tough and rubbery cord between us was clamped and cut. It was not the easiest start.

I barely got to see Evan that day. As soon as he was born, two nurses rushed him to a medical bassinet to clean his tiny body. How unnecessary, I thought, longing to touch his beautiful, glistening skin, catch his loud cry in the curl of my ear, let him burrow in the groove between my floppy belly and my heart. But when I asked to hold him, they hesitated, looking at each other. Please, I begged, suddenly afraid. So they let me hold him for half a minute, then scooped him up again, saying he was going to neonatal intensive care. His respiratory rate was falling, they said. Don't worry, the nurse told me.

Poor prodigal father in Jesus' parable. He didn't have a Leslie to send to stay with his boy as I did. "Don't leave him," I told Leslie. "What about you?" he asked. "I don't want him to be alone," I said. Were those also the prayers of the father in the parable? God, go with my child. Watch over him. Don't leave him. I fear for him. I don't want him to be alone.

Alone in the recovery room, I wept when I saw the empty bassinet. Was Evan still struggling to breathe? Not knowing what was happening was terrible. I couldn't call, since cell phones weren't allowed in the hospital. I tried to pump some milk, but it was still new and I could only get a teaspoon. When I spilled half of that, I wept again. Was this all I could give? Would it be enough?

That night I walked to the intensive care unit to see our baby, carrying those few drops of milk. Respecting the wires and tubes everywhere—down his throat, across his hand and his heart, even the

sole of his foot—we gently caressed toes, counted fingers, stared at his sleeping face. I was determined that when we finally took him home, we would give Evan whatever he needed, even if it hurt. And it often did. Some of it is a distant memory—the swollen eyes and sleepless nights of feedings every two hours, the painful breast infection caused by "improper latching" in those early days. I was determined not to quit. I wasn't letting go of anything I didn't need to; not yet.

At three months came a moment that would have repulsed my old pre-baby self. Evan and I were playing, and I held him over my head, smiling and chattering up into his little face—and he spit up directly into my mouth. And then he smiled. It wasn't so much gross as it was revelatory. I didn't puke. I laughed. What is this crazy, deep, boundless love that makes a person take leave of her senses?

Is this the boundless love that made the prodigal father run to embrace and forgive a much-missed younger child, encompassing even his dirt and sin? Is this the compassion that made him reassure and forgive a disgruntled older son? Is this how God stands, not at a distance from our dirt and drool, but coming close to mark us with a joyful kiss?

I hope I can love Evan in just such a way. I want him to make good choices and stay close to me, but even if he doesn't, that's the way it goes. I'd rather love him mercifully, unconditionally, spitting up, and laughing as we go.

Elizabeth Hunter attends Holy Family Lutheran Church in Chicago and is a section editor for *The Lutheran* magazine. She and her husband, Leslie, love reading to their son, Evan, who digests a lot of literature, judging from the well-chewed corners of his favorite board books.



WHEN DONALD JACKSON CRACKS AN EGG AND GENTLY SEPARATES THE WHITE FROM THE YOLK, HE IS NOT PREPARING TO EAT BREAKFAST OR BAKE A CAKE. HE IS MIXING INK. JACKSON IS THE OFFICIAL CALLIGRAPHER OF *THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE*, A TWO-FOOT TALL, THREE-FOOT WIDE, 1,150-PAGE, SEVEN-VOLUME, HAND-SCRIBED, ILLUMINATED BIBLE.

"WHEN I'M MIXING INK, I SORT OF GO INTO A NEUTRAL STATE," SAID JACKSON, A NATIVE OF ENGLAND AND THE WORLD'S FOREMOST WESTERN CALLIGRAPHER. "ONCE THAT HAPPENS, IT'S A KIND OF OPENING UP. YOU'VE MIXED THE INK, YOU'RE MAKING PAINT, AND YOU'RE ALMOST GETTING YOURSELF ON TRACK. IT'S A KIND OF MENTAL PREPARATION AS WELL AS A PHYSICAL PREPARATION OF THESE MATERIALS."

The Saint John's Bible Project: Reclaiming a Vanished Art

by Kristin Searfoss

Jackson, also known as the Queen's calligrapher, is working on an eight-year project commissioned by Saint John's Abbey and University in central Minnesota. He and a group of calligraphers he has trained are hand lettering every word in the Bible just as it was done by monks in the Middle Ages. *The Saint John's Bible* is the first project of its kind to be undertaken by a Benedictine monastery in 500 years, says Carol Marrin, who has directed the project since 2000. "This Bible is a wonderful way for people to experience Scripture in a way they haven't before," she said. "It offers them the Benedictine tradition of using Scripture to seek God. There is beautiful handwriting on every page. Every page is an incredible piece of art."

The Saint John's Bible was proposed by the monks at Saint John's Abbey who wanted to revive monastic history and "ignite the spiritual imagination" of people throughout the world in a new millennium. "It's the one thing we'll probably be remembered for 500 years from now," said Eric Hollas, OSB, a monk of Saint John's Abbey and associate director of arts and culture at Saint John's University. "Most of the buildings that all of us see today are going to be gone 500 years from now. And oddly enough, this one piece of human artistic achievement will probably still be here."

REVIVING A MONASTIC TRADITION

The eight-year project also reminds us of the role that monasteries

played in the Middle Ages when they served as centers of culture and learning that kept the tradition of Scripture reading alive for the world. Had the monasteries not preserved knowledge in the Middle Ages when most of the population was illiterate, Western civilization might still be reeling from that loss. We owe much of our civil progress to monks and monasteries that uplifted the written word, made it appealing, and influenced entire societies to take up reading.

Scheduled for completion in 2007, *The Saint John's Bible* was commissioned in 1998, and the public was introduced to the project in 1999. As artistic director for the project, Jackson leads the team of calligraphers in writing and illumi-

nating the Bible at his scriptorium in Wales. The team is made up of skilled scribes. They meet at regular intervals to hold together the weight, texture, and appearance of the script.

ANCIENT ART, MODERN INNOVATIONS

The Saint John's Bible project incorporates many of the characteristics of the originals on which it is patterned. It will be as big as some of the great medieval Bibles, about two feet tall and three feet wide when opened. Its nearly 1,150 pages will be bound in seven volumes.

"When people see the Bible they are immediately impressed by the sheer physicality of it," said Mag Patridge, marketing and communications, Saint John's Uni-

versity. "Most have never seen a book this large. Most have never seen such an endless stream of elegant script. Most have seen neither gold leaf nor pages of vellum to which it is applied."

Pages are made of calfskin vellum, and the team of scribes uses goose and swan quills, natural handmade inks, hand-ground pigments, and gold and silver leaf. When the Bible is completed, it will have 160 major illuminations that will clarify and explain the Word of God.

The word *illumination* is from the Latin word *light*, and it means more than just light from a lamp. It also connotes spiritual enlightenment. Illuminations were more than decorative; they were visual aids for congregations that were largely

illiterate. Gilding, either gold leaf or tin leaf, caught and reflected the available light, thus illuminating the Word, which in turn illuminated the souls of its readers and hearers.

"Illuminations suggest a way into the Scripture visually," Marrin said. "It really takes you into it. People bring 50 percent of their own experiences into the illuminations."

Color in the pages of *The Saint John's Bible* is not reserved for the illuminations. Small illustrations, often created with gold leaf, decorate the margins of the Bible. Each page contains an illuminated book heading. New paragraphs are marked by small colored bullets and verse numbers appear in the margins or in the line of text. In addition, each chapter begins with a large chapter number.

"The Bible has so many different personalities of text within it, like an orchestral composition," Jackson said. "There are places where trumpets are blowing and cymbals are clashing, and there are places of serenity and calmness and poetry."

While the Bible project pays such careful attention to the beauty and integrity of a handwritten and hand-illuminated text, it is also contemporary. *The Saint John's Bible* isn't a facsimile of a



Donald Jackson

medieval Bible, but a Bible for the 21st century and beyond.

The text may be lettered in black ink made of carbon, but each page is designed by state-of-the-art technology. A computer sizes the text, defines line breaks, and lays out full-size page spreads with sketches in position. Jackson designed contemporary typefaces and is creating illuminations that speak to readers today, including “reflections of science, technology, and space; [use of] multicultural and inter-religious imagery; and depiction of women.”

“I use the computer to take out the drudgery of having to repaint and paint again in different places,” Jackson said. “Those things are open to me which were not open to previous artists, but they would have used them because we always do. We always use whatever is at hand.”

Another important way *The Saint John's Bible* is tailored to modern-day readers is the English translation it uses: The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) was selected by theologians and scholars at Saint John's University as the translation for *The Saint John's Bible* because its predecessor, the Revised Standard Version, was officially authorized for use by all major Christian Churches—Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and

Eastern Orthodox. The NRSV is a modern English translation.

A LOST TREASURE TO ENGAGE US

With *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's Abbey and University are helping to ensure that today's readers and hearers of the Bible and those who view the many exhibitions planned for the project will never forget the value and meaning of text hand-lettered on vellum pages and hand-illuminated with images that bring glory to the Word of God and spark the imagination.

The Saint John's Bible will draw viewers and listeners to its size, color, beauty, and power. Saint John's Abbey and University, which will be the Bible's home, will use it for liturgical purposes during important masses and other celebrations. The Bible's making is being documented for closer study of art, creativity, and the spiritual life, including a better understanding of new traditions in bookmaking and calligraphy. National and international exhibits include an April 17–July 3, 2005, show at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts titled *Illuminating the Word: The Saint John's Bible*. Other national and international showings are planned.

To reach its goal of making the excitement of its artistic endeavor available to everyone, Saint John's

University is currently working on plans to offer the Bible for sale in several forms: a limited edition of full-size facsimiles, trade reproductions of each volume, a book describing the processes involved, a book of reflections, and fine art prints. After finding and reinterpreting a lost art, Saint John's won't let us lose it again.

The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles completed in May 2002 make up the first volume of *The Saint John's Bible*. The Pentateuch was finished in August 2003, and the Book of Psalms was completed in April 2004. Four more volumes remain—Prophets, Wisdom Books and Poetry, Historical Books and Letters, and Revelation.

Jackson calls this project his Sistine Chapel endeavor. “The one thing I've always wanted to do was the Bible—to make the Word of God live on a page. I've gotten the nearest to God doing calligraphy. I'm close to God every time I do it, every time I make a mark.”

Kristin Searfoss is a watercolor painter and freelance writer in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee.

Much of the information in this article is on *The Saint John's Bible* project comes from the project's Web site. See the Action & Advocacy Guide on page 37 for more information.



Readers Write

DEAR LUTHERAN WOMAN TODAY,

Today I received the December *LWT*. I was so pleased to see the article on “Standing with Africa.” I know you must make choices about what to include, but I wish every issue had at least one article about mission activity in other countries. If there cannot be a long article like the one on Africa, then maybe a series of several short ones on the same country. To state it bluntly, so many people are ignorant about Africa or other areas where our missionaries have gone and are still working. Between July 1966 and July 1974, I spent four years in Liberia in educational work. I wish readers of *Lutheran Woman Today* had more opportunity to learn about Liberia and other places. When I think of the money spent for Halloween costumes worn once, the amount of food on many tables at Thanksgiving, the thousand of ads for Christmas gifts, I wonder if we are the rich man and the African people, especially children, are Lazarus at our gate. Yes, I am harshly judgmental. Some of it could be because most of us *don't know*. Who will spread the word about these destitute people?

Helen, Cedar, Minn.

DEAR READERS,

In nearly every issue of *Lutheran Woman Today*, we do include at least one article with a global focus. In the past calendar year alone, we have featured a number of articles that span the globe from Peru to Palestine, Colombia to Mexico, Liberia to Haiti. After reading such articles, you may want to share

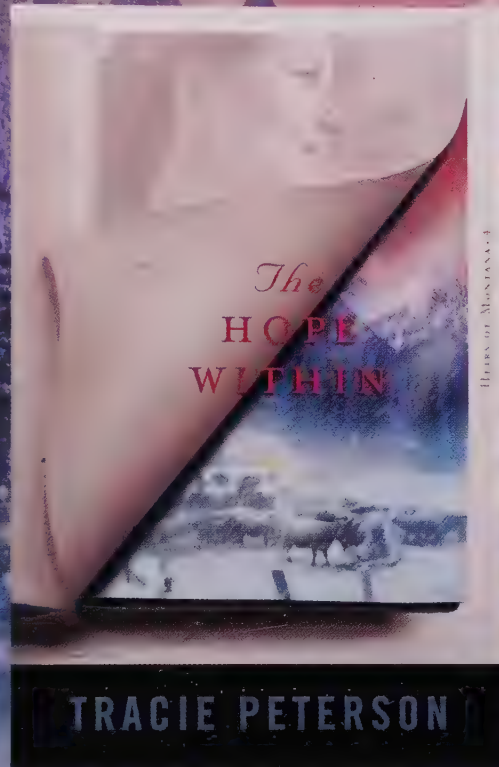
them with others. It is a wonderful way to encourage fruitful discussion about our systems and ways of living as compared to other places around the world. We agree that knowledge and information are the way to go to help share the news. At times, God works in mysterious ways. In this case, we hope you'll agree, we can see an easy way to help share this message. The even better news is it comes to your mailbox 10 times a year!

While we're at it, let us share some more good news about an exciting resource that will be tucked inside your July/August 2005 issue of *LWT*. We are happy to announce that a special resource has been developed intended to help us become more educated about and aware of the others in this world. In July, we are taking a bold step by developing an ecumenical peace issue with our Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, and Mennonite sisters where we will highlight how we can make this a more peaceful world. Over the course of the next year or so, we will emphasize various countries each month in our magazine (working with the ELCA Division for Global Mission) to give our subscribers a better idea about what is happening to women beyond our borders.

While we are doing this, we will be asking “How can we all do something to further peace in the world?” We hope to cover the world in prayer by employing a special peace project in the July/August issue. You won't want to miss it!

Peace, Nancy Goldberger, editor

A STORY OF FAITH AND STRENGTH ON THE BIG SKY PLAINS



Montana's own Tracie Peterson offers a powerful conclusion to this bestselling saga, as the Selby family is pushed to the brink—spiritually and physically. This uplifting finale celebrates the courage it takes to persevere and the faith that is the foundation for such courage.

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FINDING

a Vision of Hope

by Josselyn Bennett



afflicted by the ills of poverty, finding a sense of purpose can be an important part of constructing a vision for the future. What follows are two stories of hope from a community and a personal perspective. These true stories also demonstrate the power a church can offer those in crises and how standing with communities and individuals can make a positive difference.

During a recent visit to the Lutheran Center in Mexico City, I was introduced to Augustina Reyes, a woman of great faith. She shared her life story with some of us who work for the ELCA's Division for Church in Society, and we learned valuable lessons about the struggles of our neighbors to the south living in poverty. Augustina's story spanned the last four decades of her life. She began with the struggles of the 1960s and the development of a Christian-based community movement that studied the life of Saint Francis, sang songs, and shared their stories of trying to survive in a difficult time.

At that time, she lived in Guerrero, an industrialized state on Mexico's Pacific Coast. The area attracted many people looking for jobs and a decent living wage to support their families. Several priests and a bishop

came to provide for the needs of the people spiritually and in other practical ways, because the bishop felt this community was truly the church. Augustina was there for these new arrivals, helping develop a system that offered food, temporary shelter, and support. She saw the value of creating community, showing the newer residents the importance of being welcoming and hospitable to those who would come after them. They grew gardens that provided food for the new families, a gesture that was much appreciated.

CHANGE BRINGS OPPORTUNITY

Unfortunately, the textile and automobile factories saw the people as a source of cheap labor. In the '70s, the church was called upon to help organize the workers to campaign against child labor,

low wages, and long working hours. The church organized labor committees that later formed labor unions. While the workers were on strike, the people of faith provided them food from their gardens. It was an interesting time when social and faith movements worked hand in hand to create a better working environment for the people.

Again, Augustina served as an inspiration in the community. She became involved with political groups, organizing voter education and registration, and monitoring polling places so the voters would feel safe when voting. At that time, those who worked for a more democratic government could expect to be harassed by local police and tyrannical governments. In fact, Augustina and others suffered persecution by the government, and their names

were placed on a watch list. But she persevered in her convictions.

In the 1980s, the church became more of a welcoming place for women and lay people, allowing them to participate more fully in its work. Before priests had been expected to do all the spiritual work of the church. A sense of solidarity existed among people in the community. But then the bishop who had been such a leader in the community died, causing some church and community members to lose hope in the future. Chaos and disorganization resulted. However, all was not lost, according to Augustina. Some recognized the need to band together, so they organized again, starting with political education. In the 1990s, the people may have been very poor, but they recognized the strength that came from acting in solidarity.

Augustina has always been deeply involved with the ministries of her church and community. She has worked closely with women in their struggle to provide for their families. She works in the political arena and is a voice for the poor. Her life is a clear example of the connection between faith and daily life. She requested that we pray for her and the people in Cuernavaca where she now continues her work. She asked me to share this story as a sign of the hope of the people.

ANOTHER FAITH-FILLED LIFE

Soon after returning from Mexico, I began preparing for World AIDS Day 2004, and another story of a woman of great faith came to me. For the first time, a person living with HIV, Saengchan Inchai, spoke during the Red Ribbon Concert in Hong Kong. Jointly organized by the St. John's Cathedral HIV Education Centre in Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Youth Choir, the concert was designed to observe World AIDS Day and raise money for the Centre and awareness of AIDS/HIV. Inchai, a brave woman indeed, shared her story with more than 200 people from different walks of life gathered for the Red Ribbon Concert. Here is an edited version of her story.

"I am 38 years old and live with my daughter, Vichuda Inchai, 11, in a rural village in Ban Nong Bua, approximately 45 kilometers from the city center. I was born in a family with just enough food to live on. My parents were farmers, and I sometimes took part-time jobs to support the family. I stopped my education when I finished grade nine to help my family financially. I have a sister who carried on her education, but I was unable to continue.

"Later, I got the opportunity to take sewing lessons, but there were no jobs available for me when I

finished the lessons. So, I became a housekeeper for three years and took another job as a salesperson, which lasted three months. I spent another year working as a waitress, and when the number of customers increased, I helped in the kitchen. After that job, I moved to work in a restaurant for the Nurses Association at Maharaj Hospital, Chiang Mai University. After a year I moved again, this time to work as a housekeeper in a guesthouse. I met the owner of a tailor store near the guesthouse, and he invited me to work there. I accepted because I was trained for it, and I enjoyed that type of work.

"While I worked at the tailor store, I met my future husband Udom Yana. After learning about each other for a while, we were married in 1991. My husband was a loving person who took great care of our family. It was a time when I felt warm and loved. Two years after we were married, we had a daughter."

UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY

Inchai continued, "But the unthinkable happened in 1995 when my daughter turned two years old. My husband tested HIV positive. After a while, my husband became ill. I was shocked and wondered how this could have happened. My feelings were of anger and

"MY HUSBAND TESTED HIV POSITIVE."

confusion. I wanted to kill my husband and felt that if my husband tested positive, I might be positive too.

"I was sad and worried since I was aware that all AIDS patients will die. I was scared of death and concerned that my daughter will lose her parents while she is still so young. As medicines were unaffordable, I was worried about finding money—which I did not have—to pay for the cost of treatment. I was afraid that people would have negative attitudes toward me, and if so, where would I find a job to help pay for the medical expenses. I felt sorry for my daughter for she might not have anyone to play with if they know that her parents are both HIV positive. I lost hope in life. The future of a happy family evaporated away from me. I also feared that my daughter might have contracted the disease from me during pregnancy. I felt lost and wondered what I did to deserve this.

"All these feelings kept replaying on my mind but when I thought of my lovely daughter, my sick husband, my parents, sister, and other affected people, I kept fighting. My husband introduced me to an AIDS organization, and they often visited

and helped me through my hard times. My husband also became a volunteer for two years with a private organization dealing with affected patients. Since my husband became sick more often, he had to stop working. I had to take over the burden of finding financial support, taking care of my daughter and my sick husband. I was tired, but I forgave my husband and was ready to take care of him. He died in 1997.

"The experience I had been through helped strengthen me. I felt that I should help others who were facing pain and suffering, so I joined a group of people facing similar situations. We called ourselves *Groum Kwam Wang Mai* (New Hope Group). This gave me hope for a better future, hope for better medicine, and hope for an opportunity within the community. Our group members visited families who had lost hope and helped them find happiness. I wanted to help as much as possible.

"In 2000, I became a volunteer and underwent training in techniques and methods in helping others to heal their body and soul. Later, I became a volunteer helping AIDS patients within the community."

IS OPPORTUNITY KNOCKING?

These are but two stories that illustrate the cycles of lost and found hope and the power of community and faith. As we prayerfully consider ways we might become more involved, how might we find the needs of the larger community? How might we as individuals and congregations open our eyes and hearts more fully? The ELCA offers many opportunities to be more involved. These are great places to explore and discover your church at work. Information listed in this issue's Action & Advocacy Guide on page 37 provides some suggested links for starting or furthering a journey of connection between faith and community. Who knows? Perhaps this could be the first step toward practicing outrageous generosity regularly. How will we be transformed in the process?

As we seek to become ever more like Christ in our daily lives, may we be agents of change that help the lost become the found.

Josselyn Bennett is the ELCA director for Education and Program Resources in the Division for Church in Society. She attends Bethel Lutheran Church in Chicago.



LOST

BUT FOUND

KNOWING WHOSE WE ARE

by P.K. McCary

AS CHRISTIANS, WE'RE NEVER REALLY LOST, but sometimes we sure feel that way. P.K. McCary explains how God always knows where we are—physically, spiritually, and emotionally—even if we are unsure ourselves.

As the mother searched inside the lost and found box at her son's school, she picked up item after item and wondered "What's your story?" A wool mitten, a key on a colorful string imprinted with the letters W.W.J.D., a coloring book, and other long-forgotten items were piled in the box. She lifted one after another and remembered how much she fussed when her son told her of losing his notebook. She reminded him that it was his responsibility to keep up with his school things. He had forgotten it, he told her. He didn't mean to. As she rifled through the box, she guessed that similar

conversations had probably been repeated by other parents and children about many of these lost objects. At last, she came to the bottom of the box. There lay her son's notebook, and she sighed with relief. What was lost had now been found.

Lost coin, lost sheep, lost people—the Bible gives us this premise: that which is lost is rejoiced for when found. When I lose my keys, it is often because I didn't put them in their usual place. As I scramble through the house hunting for them (and usually yelling at anyone nearby to join the search), my keys are always

exactly where I left them. I am so happy to see them and a little embarrassed that I became so frantic. Where was my faith, my trust that they were in my house? Hadn't I used them to get in my front door? How I suffered (and caused those around me to suffer) for not believing.

And what of the losses suffered in this new millennium? More than ever, we question the relevancy of biblical text. Over and over, we ask, "How can we reconcile the lessons in the Bible with our lives today?" It almost seems that the further we expand into the future, the more we try to rely on our own

intellect, our own brainpower, to get us through the losses of life. The stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal son who returns from the lost are core lessons that strike at our heart's desire to be found (or at least to be sought after) when we are lost. Yes, in these parables, the lost are all found. But is that the only lesson we are to learn? Is the lesson simply, when something is lost, then found, we rejoice? Of course not. I believe there is always more to the stories of old because God's mercy endures forever. God gives us the tools of faith, hope, and trust to deal with the losses in our lives.

FAITH IN BEING FOUND

I've thought long and hard about the parable lessons of the lost and found. At first, they left me with what seemed unanswerable questions. What if what is lost is never found? And if that which is lost is not found, where do we go from there?

Thinking back to the story about the box of lost and found items at school, I was struck by the question "Is anyone even looking for these items anymore?" Then I decided that perhaps the real lesson that accompanies the lost and found parables is that, though we are the lost, we are always found

because Jesus never stops searching for us—he really never leaves us. He always knows where we are.

I remember when my children (two sons and a daughter) were younger, and I took them to Disney World in Florida. Throughout our first day, I constantly reminded my eight-year-old daughter, Eryon, not to walk away from me. I admonished her to stay by my side since I felt her younger brother needed more of my attention. I wanted her to be more responsible. If she got lost, I explained, dire consequences would result. My daughter, being the strong-willed person that she was (and is), had to try it. A short time later, I turned around and she was gone. Immediate panic set in as I searched through the throngs of people who crowded the park that summer day. My precious daughter was nowhere to be found. All I wanted to do was find her and know that she was safe. After a few frantic moments, I made my way to the lost and found area with my two boys in tow. There was my daughter heading toward us with one of the mice from Cinderella. Eryon was overjoyed and evidently unafraid. "There's my Mommy," she stated proudly to the mouse. "We found her."

After hugging her desperately for a few minutes, I took her by

her shoulders and started to fuss, but as I opened my mouth, my daughter confidently told me, "See, Mommy? I knew I could find you." I was speechless. Yes, she had let me walk off on purpose. Not only was she not afraid, she wanted to prove something. She believed that she would find me without question. I hadn't been so sure. In fact, my worst fear was that she would "get lost," and without grace or compassion, I dared my strong-willed child to make my worst fears come true. In the spirit of the young, testing the waters was her response. But I was the one who almost drowned. In the midst of a crisis, how do we remember that God never leaves us?

BELIEVING IN GRACE

I've written about the losses in my life in this magazine. In a December 2002 *LWT* article, "Hope of Love," I wrote about my granddaughter's birth and death. The pain associated with her death is still vivid. It hurt then; it hurts still. But what I found was a remarkable peace that comes with finding out that God makes no mistakes and that God's grace is always sufficient. The hope of love was never lost, but the pain buried it, and for a while, it seemed lost. Yet I found it when I needed it most, and it strengthened my

faith, which was why I needed to write about it. Telling the story was my way of rejoicing on finding faith and grace. Sure, it was there all along, but it took a loss for me to rediscover it. God's grace and compassion helped me to find what I needed to get through my granddaughter's death. What was lost (not realized, not understood) was now found. It was always there—in my heart of hearts, in my soul where the mercy, grace, and compassion of God live. The seeds of those lessons had been firmly planted through study, prayer, and meditation.

When we lose something, fear, panic, and frenzy are often the resulting reactions. Fear can be our worst enemy because it causes us to lose sight of our next logical steps. Trust flies out the window.

When my siblings and I were younger, my baby sister, Ethel, would find herself separated from us in department stores when she lingered too long in the toy aisle. She remembers that she would always look up because everyone in my family is tall. She never had to panic because “someone's large head” would appear before too long. Once, however, while shopping with Mother and our other sister, Yolanda, Ethel continued walking when Mom and Yolanda stopped to look at a window dis-

play. She kept walking until she realized that she was alone. Recalling what Mother had told us, to always remember where we parked, Ethel made her way to the car. There she waited patiently for Mother to return. Mother, however, forgetting her own instructions, was frantic. Once she stopped long enough to remember, Mom went to the car and found my sister.

FINDING OUR TRUST

The young boy's notebook at the bottom of the box of lost and found items reveals an important lesson about never giving up. At times, we throw up our hands in exasperation. We end our search—leaving our treasures at the bottom of the proverbial heap because we lose our hope or our will. That thought made me sad until I started looking at the stories of our lives and decided that the stories of today can also give us insight into the stories of the Bible. God's creativity is without equal. We are always being taught, and God's plan is always being revealed. Can we stop and listen—really hear the lessons? More importantly, can we find what we need when our hope seems lost? Our life's boxes are often filled with losses. We, therefore, seriously

need the right tools to find our way through them.

Perhaps these are the lessons: Loss has a lot to do with failing to remember and not trusting enough. Do we need to know that circumstances will work themselves out? That everything will be all right? Not always. That wasn't the case when I lost my granddaughter, or more recently, my mother. We need to know in whom we should rely when we suffer loss. We need to know to trust in God always. My grandmother would say we need to remember not only who we are, but whose we are.

An old spiritual hymn declares: “I will trust in the Lord until I die.” The song reveals that when we trust in the Lord, we will earnestly seek out the coins, the sheep, the sons, the lost of this life. When we trust God to lead and guide us to the lessons of the lost, we will sweep the house of life until we find what is lost, what is unanswered, what is questioned, and we will continue the search until the day we die. Or more precisely, until we are united with God who finds us—wherever we are.

P.K. McCary, storyweaver and author of *What Matters to the Heart: An Anthology of Hope and Love*, lives in Houston, surrounded by her children and grandson.

Changed, Renewed, and Enriched

by Terri Speirs *(with many thanks for the reflections shared by LWR study visitors)*



Whether it is joining a quilting group, signing a petition to ban land mines, writing about community development, training for advocacy, or educating about fair trade—women around the world have discovered their calling through the complementary missions of the Women of the ELCA and Lutheran World Relief (LWR).

In November 2004, a group of women who participated in the LWR study visit to Tanzania, "On the Roof of Africa: the Women-to-Women Coffee Tour," offered their thoughts about how the trip changed their lives. The following is a mosaic of thoughts compiled from their writings about the trip.

MY THOUGHTS THAT I NEED TO SHARE

I need to tell you something. Sure, it's 2:30 a.m. here in my U.S. hometown, but my body is telling me it's noon in Tanzania where I was just 35 hours ago. And my brain is still overloaded with memories and experiences. I found beauty far beyond imagination, beyond literal description. Yet the memories that live are truly the spirit of the people. It is such memories that will last in my heart and mind.

This is something I cannot keep to myself. I can't help but think about how I will do my part to expand the demand for fair trade. The Lutheran World Relief Coffee Project really matters. Women know the power of women gathered together. Advocacy is in our blood as Women of the ELCA. Do you know me?

WHO AM I?

I am a composite of 16 women who participated in an LWR

Study Visit to Tanzania to learn more about how consumer choices and faith are connected. What follows are our shared reflections that serve to give voice to our diverse, yet universal experiences on this journey.

I am a teacher, a writer, a business executive, a pastor, a student, a mother, and a grandmother. I am single, married, and widowed. I have been involved with the Women of the ELCA for decades, and I am new to the Women of the ELCA, but am amazed by the success of the organization to mobilize for justice.

WHY DID I DO THIS?

My biggest fear was that I would live a life of complacency. I believed that an experience such as this is what I needed to keep my focus on what really matters. I have a very strong and urgent desire to use the talents God has given me to make a big impact on the world around me. I feel this way because it is what Jesus taught us to do; it is how we can reflect God's love and compassion to those who are hungry, sick, or in pain.

Until this point I had not figured out where or how to accept this challenge in a more global way. As a woman with many responsibilities, I haven't had much time to feed the hungry. In

searching for a way to use my talents to serve God, someone suggested that I apply for this trip to Tanzania. I was so excited and honored when I was accepted to join the trip.

WHAT DID I EXPECT?

I expected to be moved and motivated. I hoped to learn how better to make my own consumer choices. I imagined having first-hand contact with coffee farmers, and I wanted to experience the conditions of the growers of fair trade coffee. I expected to understand more fully how connected the human community is and to discern how I might play a part in creating wholeness and understanding across diverse cultures and experiences.

HOW DID I GET READY?

I prepared. I prayed. I packed. I positioned myself, as LWR advised, to become the receiver, not the giver. My gifts to others would be distributed when I returned home in the form of telling stories about the trip, educating others about the importance of fair trade, and advocating for the LWR coffee project. My gifts to myself would include discovering the importance of linking my faith with my everyday consumer and civic choices and finding my place in the world.

WHERE DID I GO?

I wound my way up the slopes of majestic Mount Kilimanjaro—a place where coffee has been farmed for centuries. There I met the people who grow “Tanzanian Jubilee” coffee for the LWR Coffee Project. I ate with them. I worked and worshipped with them. I slept in their guesthouse. I played with their children. I saw the auction barn where international coffee brokers will bid higher only if a fair-trade business practitioner is present. After all this coffee training, it is hard to drink a cup without thinking about how much work so many people put into producing this simple pleasure. It is amazing to think about how much time, money, and attention a small bean commands.

I rode in a bus over the long, dry road to Dodoma, a city in the center of the country. There, the link between strong, resourceful women and the Hekima Women’s Empowerment Project was evident. Co-sponsored by LWR and the Dodoma Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, the Hekima (Swahili for wisdom) project helps women make their own way in society. Despite drought and struggle in their country, the women hugged me, fed me, and treated me like a special person. Several women involved in the Hekima project invited me into their homes and showed me what they were doing to help generate income and make their community a better place to live. They are engaged in many things like raising

cows and chickens, sewing and making batiks, running soda pop and ice businesses from their homes, and offering classes in sewing and computers.

The young people performed a funny skit about HIV/AIDS. It seems unlikely that such a dire disease that is so prevalent in that area could be funny, but the people must try to make light of it as a survival technique.

I learned to speak the words that said it all: “Asante sana,” meaning “thank you very much.” My heart was so full that after hearing a few orphans read, sing, and dance, I cried tears of joy for what they had overcome. And still they gave more.

Bishop Mwamasika of the Dodoma Diocese called Mary Ellen

A LIST OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE NOVEMBER 3-18, 2004,

“ON THE ROOF OF AFRICA: THE WOMEN-TO-WOMEN COFFEE TOUR”

Carolyn Folke | Whitewater, Wisc.

Nancy Hanks | Mundelein, Ill.

The Rev. Nancy Hansted Meadors | Thousand Oaks, Calif.

Christie Hausman | Spokane, Wash.

Dorothy Anne Honeychurch | Butte, Mont.

Mary Ellen Kiesner | Menomonee Falls, Wisc.

Kathryn Lohre | Cambridge, Mass.

Lenore Peterson | Lynnwood, Wash.

Ruth Schriener | Franklin, Tenn.

Marie Tesch | Waseca, Minn.

Martha Wells | Woodbury, Minn.

Amalia Woolf | Fayetteville, Texas

Stacey Wise | Camarillo, Calif.

Diane Conneman | Ithaca, N.Y.

Phyllis Robinson | West Bridgewater, Mass.

Brenda Meier | Baltimore, Md.

To join these women and thousands of other Lutherans who are putting their faith into action by supporting fair trade, visit lwr.org/fairtrade or call 1-800-LWR-LWR-2.

Kiesner, president of the Women of the ELCA, and others in that organization "big elephants" because they watch out for the smaller animals. He was referring, in part, to the recent success of the 90 Ton Challenge, led by ELCA women, where Lutherans bought twice as much fair-trade coffee than in the previous year. The 90 Ton Challenge was an enormous gift to the coffee farmers I met on Mount Kilimanjaro. There, the poverty line has been pushed back because of the increase in demand for fair trade coffee products.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

When I wake at 3 or 4 a.m. while my body is re-regulating its time

clock, I reflect on my transformation and how I will act within my new place in the world.

I believe that most of the decisions we make are expressions of our values. In America, this is particularly true in areas of purchasing and public policy. My idea of stewardship has broadened because now I know it involves all of my purchasing decisions, not just the monetary gifts I offer. I hope to make the LWR Coffee Project trip a starting point for education in my own congregation about the stewardship of purchasing.

This should not be a temporary project that gives coffee farmers and their families better

lives just for now. As "women acting boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ," Women of the ELCA must embrace this project as a continuing ministry, always looking for new ways to improve what is being done.

I am forever changed, forever renewed, forever enriched with hope. Not just for Africa, but for us all.

Terri Speirs is LWR's coordinator for study visits and speakers bureau. She and her family live in St. Paul, Minn.

Note: Read the group's entire Web diary (www.lwr.org/study) and see the posted pictures for even more insight into their visit.



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Session 8

Outrageous Generosity



by Audrey West

Study text

Luke 15:11–32 (the parable of the prodigal son)

Theme verse

“And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”
(Luke 15:23–24)

Overview

Son Number One works hard, cares for his aging parents, never shirks his responsibilities, and does everything his father asks of him. Son Number Two asks Dad for a handout, leaves town, blows every cent, and decides to come home only when he’s miserable and hungry. Which one deserves to feast on the fatted calf? If the parable of the prodigal son were not so familiar, we probably would be surprised by the answer. In this month’s study we will explore the unmerited generosity of a parent who rejoices at the return of a long-lost son as if a dead child had been brought back to life. How great is God’s grace!

Opening

Say or sing verses 1 and 3 of the hymn
“Jesus Calls Us,” *LBW* #494
(Text: Cecil Frances Alexander)

Jesus calls us; o’er the tumult
Of our life’s wild, restless sea,
Day by day his voice is sounding,
Saying, “Christian, follow me.”

Jesus calls us from the worship
Of the vain world’s golden store,
From each idol that would keep us,
Saying, “Christian, love me more.”

1. What is something that reminds you of being “home”? (You may interpret “home” in whatever way seems best for you.)

Hearing the Story

Read Luke 15:11–32. Most readers probably already know the contours of this parable, but as you read, listen closely to the details and think about one element or detail that stands out for you. If possible, read the parable aloud. You might have one person read the whole parable, or you might divide it into sections.

Great Expectations

Good storytellers take into account the assumptions of their listeners, sometimes meeting those assumptions and sometimes challenging them. First-century people who heard this parable would have brought

a number of expectations with them into the story. First, they would have had cultural expectations of the proper roles of children, particularly sons. Due to their position in the family, eldest sons were typically held in high esteem. They received a larger share of the inheritance, including gifts befitting their honored place.

A second set of assumptions for first-century listeners were rhetorical expectations. One such expectation is revealed in the opening line of the parable, "There was a man who had two sons." A story about "two" typically involves a contrast, as we see in a number of other parables. One character is pious, the other is not (the parable of the Pharisee and the tax

collector); one is rich, the other is poor (the rich man and Lazarus); one is powerful, the other is weak (the widow and the unjust judge).

The parable of the prodigal son fits well into this pattern of contrast. One son leaves home and squanders his inheritance, while the other is perfectly responsible and stays home to work the fields for his father.

2. Consider Luke 15:11–16. List the characteristics, actions, or traits of the younger son that seem to you to be good or positive. Next, list the characteristics that you identify as bad or negative. If you were a neighbor of this family, would you consider the younger son a good son or a bad son?

DIVIDING THE INHERITANCE

Jewish customs of the time included two distinct ways for a father to leave his property to his children: after death through a will, or during his lifetime through a gift. Advice offered in the book of Sirach suggests that handing over one's estate while still alive, as did the father in our parable, could be a risky enterprise. (Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Sirach, is a Jewish text written in Hebrew during the second century BC. The book can be found in some editions of the Bible in the Apocrypha section, between the Old and New Testaments. It is non-canonial for Protestant Christians.)

To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, in case you change your mind and must ask for it. While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place. For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hand of your children. Excel in all that you do; bring no stain upon your honor. At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance. (Sirach 33:20–24)

Another text, Deuteronomy 21:15–17, describes the right of a firstborn son to receive a "double portion" of the inheritance from his father. In the case of two sons, the elder son receives two thirds of the estate and the younger receives one third. If the estate is divided during the father's lifetime, the sons receive title to their shares of the property, but the land itself (and all it produces) remains in the hands of the father for his lifetime. If the son sells his interest in the property, the purchaser takes possession only after the death of the father. (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, X–XXIV*, The Anchor Bible 28A [New York: Doubleday, 1985], 1087.)

Freedom and Famine

When the younger son asks his father for an early distribution of the inheritance, his father gives it to him. This is the first of many unexpected twists in the parable: It is impertinent for a son to demand the inheritance before his father dies. To leave home and the solidarity of family is also an unconventional move (although not unheard of), given the communal nature of village life in ancient Palestine. Losing a son would mean having one less person available to work the land or contribute to the well-being of the family, and it would be a significant loss for the father. Apparently the father does not raise any objections, however, and allows his son the freedom to leave home.

After converting his inheritance into cash, the son heads for “a distant land,” that is, a Gentile (non-Jewish) country where he is separated from his Jewish roots. It is not long before he has squandered all his money, a situation made even worse by a local famine. He manages to scrounge a job with a Gentile who puts him to work with the pigs. An observant Jewish farmer would not keep pigs, since these animals are “unclean”—forbidden to the Jewish people (Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8). That the prodigal would have gladly eaten the pigs’ food (the Greek text names carob pods) tells us that he was destitute.

3. The father gave his younger son the freedom to leave home and make his own choices. What do you think the parable is teaching about the human response to freedom? What is it teaching about freedom in the relationship between God and God’s children?

After the younger son has blown all his money, he and the rest of that country are caught in a devastating

famine. Famine in the Bible means more than simply a period of crop failure and hunger. In the Old Testament, famine often has theological significance, although that significance is not always the same. Famine may be understood as a punishment from God; the prophet Ezekiel brings the message that God intends to punish Jerusalem with “deadly arrows of famine” (Ezekiel 5:16) for its refusal to live according to the covenant with God (5:5–17). Famine may also be understood as a force that drives people away from home and into a foreign land: Abraham and Sarah go to Egypt because of a famine (Genesis 12:10), and Isaac is forced to leave home for the same reason (26:1). On the other hand, the ill effects of famine may bring about good in the end. It is on account of a famine that Joseph and his brothers are reconciled after many years of estrangement. (See sidebar “Joseph and his brothers,” opposite page, and Acts 7:11.)

4. Given these various meanings of famine in the Old Testament, what do you see as the significance of famine in the story of the prodigal son?

5. Consider what the parable says about the son’s decision to go home (Luke 15:17–19). In your view, what is the son’s primary motivation for returning to his father—is he repenting of his actions? Is he just looking for a meal ticket? Or is there some other reason?

A Father’s Love

Read Luke 15:20–24. Given the wasteful and reckless behavior of the younger son, one might expect that the patriarch of the family would have torn his garments and declared that his son was dead to him. After all, a third of the father’s estate had been squandered, a situation that put the entire household at

risk. But instead of turning his back on the son, the father sights him from a distance and has compassion on him. Did you notice that the father's compassion arises before the son even has a chance to open his mouth? The son hasn't even apologized, and already the father is running out to meet him and giving him a hug and a kiss (literally "falling on his neck and kissing him"). The father's love for the son overrides any displeasure he might have for the son's bad behavior.

The son launches into the speech that he had practiced in the distant country (Luke 15:21; compare with 15:18). However, before he can ask to be considered one of his father's servants, his father is already ordering those servants to bring out a load of gifts and to start preparations for a huge party. Sandals for his feet symbolize the granting of freedom, since slaves often went barefoot. The robe is "the best," a gift fit for an honored guest, and the ring—a gift typically reserved for the eldest son upon the death of the father—is a symbol of the father's authority passed now to the younger son. He was unworthy to be called a son, and now he is treated as more than a son. As if the gifts aren't enough, the father orders his servants to kill the fatted calf. There will be enough food to feed the entire household as well as friends and neighbors. This will be a grand feast for a son who has just escaped famine, a child who was dead but now is alive. How greatly do parents love their children! (Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 79.)

6. If you were the prodigal son, how would you feel to be welcomed so heartily by the parent whom you had treated so badly? What do the father's actions in welcoming his "lost" son tell us about God?

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

In its general contours, the parable of the prodigal son is a stock tale that shares a number of details with the much longer narrative about Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37–50. The prodigal son and Joseph are both younger brothers. Both are separated from their fathers and find themselves working as servants in a distant land: the prodigal because he chose to leave and Joseph because he was sold into slavery. The prodigal takes a job in the fields of a foreign master; Joseph supervises the fields of a foreign king, Pharaoh of Egypt. The prodigal is accused of wasting his money on sexual liaisons; Joseph is arrested on false sexual charges. The prodigal suffers under famine and returns to his family; Joseph saves his family from famine and moves them to his new land. Both these younger sons are eventually restored to their fathers, each of whom bestows garments, a ring, and a celebratory feast. (Pheme Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus*, [New York: Paulist, 1981], 53–54.)

GO DEEPER: LOST AND FOUND

The parable of the prodigal son is the last of a series of three parables with the same theme: What was lost has been found, so it's time to throw a party and celebrate. Read the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1–7) and the parable of the lost coin (15:8–10). Then examine the table (next page) to note the parallels among the three parables. The last space in the column of the prodigal son parable is empty. If you were telling this parable, what is the teaching or application you would want to say at the end?

	LOST SHEEP	LOST COIN	PRODIGAL SON
SITUATION	Man with 100 sheep loses one	Woman with 10 coins loses one	Father with two sons "loses" one
RESPONSE OF THE PERSON WHO LOST THE ITEM	Leaves the 99 and seeks the one that's lost	Lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and seeks diligently	Runs out to welcome his son home
OUTCOME	Calls friends and neighbors	Calls friends and neighbors	Asks servants to bring robe, sandals, ring; kill the fatted calf
STATEMENT	Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.	Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.	Let us eat and make merry, for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.
APPLICATION OR TEACHING	Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. (15:7)	Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (15:10)	<i>Fill in the blank.</i>

Who Deserves Such Generosity?

The third part of the parable (Luke 15:25–32) concerns the reaction of the eldest son when his lost-sheep brother returns to the fold. Hard at work in the fields, he doesn't know about the reunion at home until he hears music (Greek *symphonia*) and dancing.

Wanting to know what the hoopla is all about, he asks a servant, who relays the news that his brother has returned and his father has killed the fatted calf. The news obviously does not sit well with the older brother, for the text says, "he became angry and refused to go in." He gives a number of reasons for his anger:

1. “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you!” The eldest son has never taken advantage of his relationship, unlike the younger son, who asked prematurely for his inheritance and ran off with the money.

2. “I have never disobeyed your command.” The word translated as “command” in this verse is the same word translated as “commandment” when it refers to the righteousness of John the Baptist’s parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, who “were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to the *commandments* and regulations of the Lord” (1:6). The younger son, on the other hand, violated God’s commandments by dishonoring his father, by living a dissolute life in a foreign land, and by associating with pigs.

3. “You have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.” A goat is a much smaller gift than a fatted calf and would support a considerably smaller party than the big bash now in full swing for the prodigal son.

4. “But when this son of yours came back . . .” The elder son distances himself from the prodigal son by not even speaking of him as a brother. There is also an implied accusation that all the younger son had to do was return home; he did not need to apologize or admit his wrong, just show up on the doorstep.

5. “[He] has devoured your property with prostitutes.” We do not know whether the older brother heard reports of the prodigal son’s doings while he was away or whether he is simply making a wild guess about the “dissolute living” (mentioned in 15:13). In any case, the older son finds the younger son’s behavior deplorable.

6. “You killed the fatted calf for him!” After listing the reasons why he is angry, the son spits out the last and perhaps most infuriating reason. Despite the fact that the prodigal son clearly does not deserve it,

the father has welcomed him home with a party to beat all parties.

7. From the eldest son’s perspective, he has been a good son: He’s consistent, shows up for work every day, works hard, follows the rules, lives properly. In your view, is the elder son justified in his anger? Why or why not?

In the face of his son’s anger, the father begs him to come in and join the party (15:28). Even after the elder son explodes with his tirade of reasons why the celebration is unjustified, the father stays calm. “Son,” he says (literally “child,” a term of affection), “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” In one sentence, the father affirms the closeness of their relationship and gently reminds his eldest son that he loses nothing by welcoming his brother home and joining in the celebration.

8. How do you think the story ends: Does the elder son join the celebration, or does he sulk outside and refuse to go in? What does the open ending of the parable teach us about God? How might it be inviting you to change?

WHERE’S MOM?

One surprising thing about the parable of the prodigal son is that the mother never makes an appearance. Lest her absence lead some to understand God as only masculine, we should recall the parable of the lost coin, which comes immediately before the prodigal son (Luke 15:8–10). In that parable, a woman loses one of her 10 silver coins; she cleans house from top to bottom, looking for a single coin. Who represents God in that parable? Not the coin!

WHO HEARS THE PARABLE?

Jesus tells this parable in response to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling among themselves about Jesus associating with "tax collectors and sinners," even eating with them (Luke 15:1-2). To give the problem a contemporary spin, we might imagine something like this: The diocesan council notes that the pastor has been inviting crooked politicians and drug dealers or embezzlers and mobsters to dinner at the parsonage. The church leaders are understandably concerned, as were the Pharisees and scribes (the religious authorities) in Jesus' day.

From their own perspective, the Pharisees and scribes are not lost, and they do not need repentance. In this regard they are like the 99 righteous people who do not need repentance in the parable of the lost sheep (15:7). They are very much like the older son in our parable: They try hard to do the right thing, live in obedience to God's commandments, and live responsible lives; some have been committed to God their whole lives. They may well be angry that "tax collectors and sinners" are getting the benefits of Jesus' ministry when those people do not live according to God's covenant.

With its open ending, the parable makes it necessary for the Pharisees (and us) to write their own ending. Will they listen to Jesus and join the feast? Or will they separate themselves from the celebration because of their jealousy and anger that notorious sinners are included in the guest list?

Closing

Prayer: Gracious God, you bestow your gifts on all your children. Give us a joyful heart in serving you and a spirit of welcome to all who turn to you. Help us to rejoice in the generosity of your grace. In Christ's name and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Embodying the parable

1. Gather with friends or family for a celebratory meal. During the meal, invite all present to name something about each other person for which they are thankful.
2. Participate in a congregational event designed for families, even if you are single or not a parent.
3. Make a donation (of time, money, or other gifts) to an organization that supports at-risk families or children.
4. Adopt a children's Sunday school class. Send a card or note to each member of the class, telling her or him how glad you are to have them as part of the church family.
5. Write a prayer of thanksgiving to the God who welcomes you home.
6. Volunteer in a classroom in your church or in a school in your community.

Looking Ahead

Next month, in our last session on the parables of Jesus, we will consider the parable of the rich fool and the sayings about lilies and ravens (Luke 12:16-30). Jesus challenges his followers to trust in God. "Do not worry," he says. God knows what you need.

ACTION & ADVOCACY GUIDE

The Saint John's Bible Project: Reclaiming a Vanished Art (page 12)

For more information on *The Saint John's Bible* project, visit the Web site (saintjohnsbible.org).

Are you curious about what monastic life was like in the Middle Ages? Visit britainexpress.com/history for a historical perspective.

Finding a Vision of Hope (page 18)

Would you like to know more about World AIDS Day? Visit the ELCA Web site (elca.org) and follow the World AIDS Day link.

Also on the ELCA pages, you can discover ways to more fully become part of the ELCA community. Suggestions abound for sharing information and promoting awareness of the ill effects that unfair working conditions have in our community and the world. Follow the links to the social statements on economic life (elca.org/socialstatements/economiclife). Here you can begin to learn how we, as a community of Christians, can overcome unfair wages and promote healthy economic standards.

Support the ELCA Hunger appeal (elca.org/hunger) and join in the fight against world hunger.

To access resources for HIV prevention education, AIDS observances, and the call for a ministry of caring, visit the HIV resources links at the ELCA site (elca.org). Read the ELCA's social statement "AIDS and the church's ministry of caring" (elca.org/socialstatements/aids). For a list of faith-based external Web links, check the options available from the Division of Church in Society (elca.org/dcs/websites.html).

Lost, but Found: Knowing Whose We Are (page 22)

P.K. McCary's book, *What Matters to the Heart: An Anthology of Hope and Love*, may be ordered from on-line booksellers such as Amazon.com. McCary, author of *Black Bible Chronicles* and *Rappin' With Jesus*, often writes about being a mother, grandmother, and sister, sharing insights and intimacies that bring her closer to God. She also has dedicated her work and life to peace and justice. The stories she writes emphasize her belief that God should bless all the people of the world, not just certain cultures.

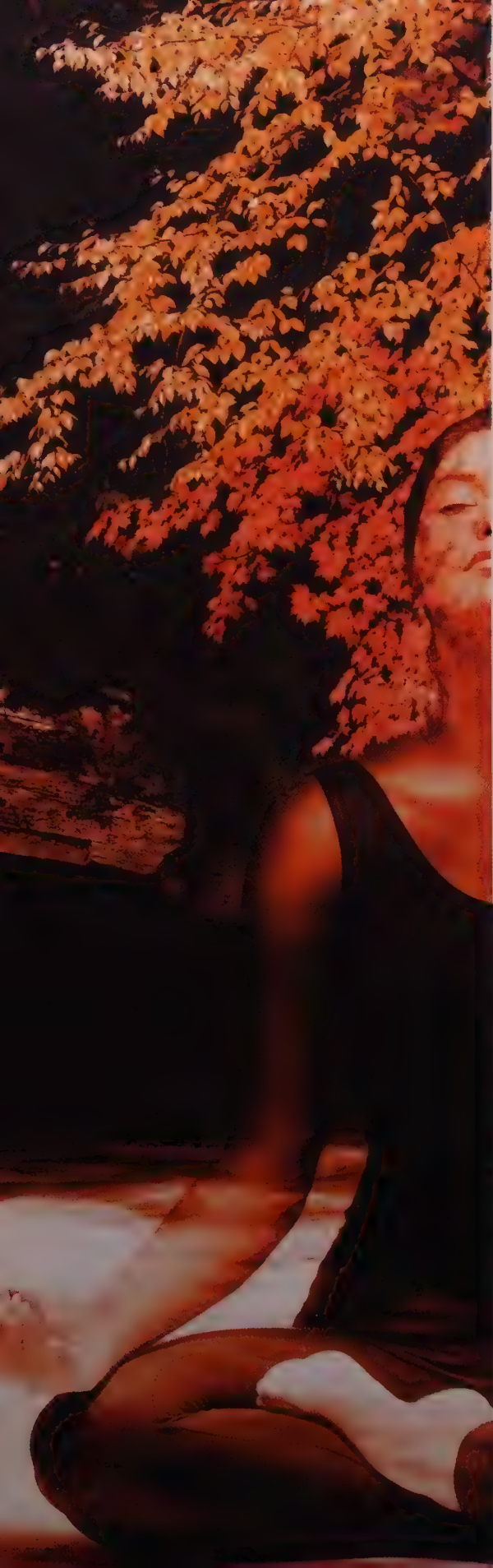
Changed, Renewed, and Enriched (page 26)

Visit the Lutheran World Relief Web pages (lwr.org/study) to read the group's entire Web diary and to see pictures from their journey.

Access the LWR site and find out how you can further your advocacy efforts by supporting this important ministry. Join the women listed in this article and thousands of other Lutherans who are putting their faith into action by supporting fair trade, visit lwr.org/fairtrade or call 1-800-LWR-LWR-2.

Keep Your Soul out of the Lost and Found: Strategies to Avoid Burnout (page 38)

You can order a copy of Lisa Whaley's book, *Reclaiming My Soul from the Lost and Found*, by visiting her Web site (lifeworksynergy.com) or from booksellers such as Amazon.com. Special thanks to Book News Network (booknewsnetwork.net) for bringing Lisa's story to the pages of *Lutheran Woman Today*.



*K*eeep your soul

LIFE IS FULL OF JOY AND CHALLENGE.

Although modern technology has simplified our lives on many levels, it has increased the pace of work and life, often adding to our stress level. Add to that the new concerns and threats of our global world, and it is easy to see just how quickly it can all get to be too much.

out of the lost and found

STRATEGIES TO AVOID BURNOUT

by Lisa Whaley

As people of faith, we know we do not have to go it alone. When we come up against those unexpected or overwhelming challenges in life, we know that through prayer, the support of others, and some practical strategies, we can focus on the truly important aspects of our lives. We can separate the chaff from the wheat, and go forward as productive, faithful individuals.

In my own painful struggle of dealing with personal challenges, I learned that it was ultimately my faith that helped me identify who I was not, then helped me discover who I truly am. We each have to define success for ourselves, ensuring that it is not in conflict with our core values, regardless of societal dictates. No

longer am I trying to live up to everyone else's expectations.

In my book, *Reclaiming My Soul from the Lost and Found*, I share the journey that took me from individual and professional triumph to absolute anguish and my desperate attempt to save my daughter's—and my own—life. I caution others who seek a seamless balance between family and career and who believe their lives are perfect. I was once that woman—the one who seemed to have it all—a loving marriage, two beautiful children, a fast-track career, a fine home, and a stylish lifestyle. But when the façade vanished in a perfect storm of trouble, I had to cope with the reality.

In my book, I share the decisions and actions that led me to lose

sight of my own soul, and the ones that allowed me to heal and reclaim my spirit, my family, and my faith. I share the 10 guiding principles of finding synergy and harmony between life and work that I developed years ago—principles that I disregarded for far too long and, at last, have incorporated back into my life.

A SAMPLE OF KEY PRINCIPLES

I. BE YOURSELF and don't try to be someone that you're not. Success is dependent on what we do, not who we are. As we get older, faking it, that is, trying to create a different personality, requires an exhausting amount of energy and will inevitably lead to failure.

2. SET REALISTIC GOALS for yourself that are not in conflict with your personal values. Goals can keep us moving in the right direction, yet they should not clash with our standards, spirituality, and priorities.

3. TAKE CHARGE of and responsibility for your own career and your own life. Be proactive, not reactive. Don't let outside actions and events dictate your decisions. Measure your progress toward the realistic goals that you have

set. When reverses and disappointments occur, adjust your goals accordingly, but keep moving toward them.

4. MAKE TIME for yourself. Arrange your calendar so that you have enough time for your own relaxation, including time for prayer. Remember, you are one of the most important people in your own life. Whether you spend time with a hobby, exercise, meditation, or getting your nails done, you should enjoy your own company.

5. CELEBRATE SUCCESSES and learn from failures. Even small milestones should be celebrated. Robert F. Kennedy said, "Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly." There is no shame in making mistakes, but try to avoid repeating them.

Lisa Whaley is president of Life Work Synergy, LLC, an organization dedicated to energizing and motivating individuals to be the best they can be in all dimensions of their lives.

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GRACE NOTES

Trust the Navigator

by Mary Ellen Kiesner

MY HUSBAND, DAN, AND I LOVE TO TAKE UNPLANNED ROAD TRIPS. THESE ARE DECIDED ON THE SPUR OF the moment and usually last only a day or overnight. Dan's job is to drive. My responsibility is to navigate. Before starting out, Dan will give me the destination, and I am supposed to dig out all the maps in my possession and determine the route we should take. We never take the most obvious route because that would be no fun.

As we begin traveling, our journey will take us in various directions. Often, many surprises present themselves along the way. However, the hardest part for Dan is when we seem to be going the wrong way. He will ask, "Are you sure we are going in the right direction?" My response always is, "Trust the navigator!"

So it is with our faith walk and journey with our Lord. We have invariably encountered difficulties, roadblocks, and a sense we're going in the wrong direction. More than ever, we simply have to trust our Navigator. God gives us direction in the promise of our baptism through word and sacrament and the powerful leading of the Holy Spirit.

Women of the ELCA are involved in a journey that often holds glimpses into the unexpected. We need only to be involved in our *Lutheran Woman Today* Bible study, "Everyday Surprises: The Parables of Jesus," to come across those discoveries that bring us delight and awareness. Other resources and programming challenge us to journey down paths perhaps not comfortably taken, such as "Today's Dream, Tomorrow's Reality," "Listening to God:

A Guide to Discernment," "Rachel's Day," "Children of the Light," and "Children's Sabbath."

Our mission statement calls us "to enable women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ." I would challenge every congregational/intercongregational unit, special unit, conference/cluster, and synodical organization to dig out your spiritual maps. Take a good look at what you are doing and prepare yourselves to travel down new roads. Take different and daring risks. The vistas and views you encounter might be a little scary and may even seem overwhelmingly difficult. But I guarantee you that you will not regret it. Women of the ELCA are known for being at the forefront of new ministries. They are the first to embrace the needs of a hurting society, and they respond to those needs in a relevant and timely manner. In other words, you as faith-filled women respond to the Navigator before the pavement of possibility is dry.

In just a few months, Women of the ELCA will travel the exciting road to our Triennial Gathering in San Antonio, Texas, July 5-10. As women prepare to "Act Boldly" in the name of Jesus Christ, may you be challenged to travel that road with your sisters in faith. A highway of opportunity awaits you. A new world of possibilities also awaits you in the new triennium. God will guide you through it. Simply trust the Navigator!

Mary Ellen Kiesner is churchwide president of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Grace and Circumstance

by Catherine Malotky

I HAVE BEEN WELL TRAINED, GOD. I HAVE ALWAYS TRIED VERY HARD TO BE A GOOD GIRL. I WANT TO please you, to do your will, and to be a reflection of you in the world. I haven't done a half-bad job, though I know I'm not perfect.

God, this is why the story of the prodigal son gets to me. I am, at least in theory, happy about the father's generosity, especially since we tend to interpret this story with you as the father. It's a good thing, given that we aren't perfect, and we all need your grace. But God, that youngest son rankles me. Youngest sons—those people who don't play by the golden rule—always rankle me.

I get upset when I see cigarette butts abandoned by the roadside or sidewalk. I get disgusted when people don't pick up after their dogs on the trail I walk every day. Their thoughtlessness bugs me. I find it rude when drivers pass up those waiting patiently in their lanes, sneaking into traffic just before the light changes to red. If we all took our turn, the traffic wouldn't back up so. It disturbs me when people waste energy indiscriminately, like driving huge gas-guzzlers. I find it selfish when people don't share their wealth with those who are marginalized. "Am I the only one who gives money away?" I ponder. Didn't you command us to tend to the widow, orphan, and sojourner?

So when I read that the youngest son demanded his inheritance and then squandered it, my hackles rise. My sense of right and wrong, of playing by perfectly reasonable rules, of honoring the past and future, gets triggered. What a waste.

In theory, I'm glad you can forgive the youngest sons out there. But I'm stunned. Let's talk parenting here. What incentive does that give the oldest son to keep on keepin' on?

Of course, as soon as I stand back a little and start thinking about it, my self-righteous indignation starts looking pretty grim. Have I ever left litter in my wake? Have I ever forgotten my plastic bags and left doggy doodle on my walk? Have I ever spaced off a merge and then been stuck having to sneak in at the end? Is my car fuel efficient *enough*? And do I give *selflessly* of my resources so that others might have enough?

I really can't get too high and mighty, God. I know. It's about doing the right thing, not expecting reward. It's about doing whatever I can do, not comparing my "performance" to what someone else is doing. I can't blame the oldest son for being miffed, but I can think about the gracious way you forgive me when I get self-righteous. That self-righteousness makes me, like the older brother, blind to your grace. It robs me of a sense of beauty and enough-ness. It keeps me in competition, which is not what being a Christian is about.

The cross and empty tomb can bring me back to you, gracious God. Keep my eyes and heart with you. Help me with my hope and my peace. Amen.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as representative to several synods in the Upper Midwest. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

UPCOMING ISSUE THEMES

May—Free to be Bold

God Knows What You Need

Life can be fraught with stress and worry. But does God want us to spend our time worrying? Jesus asks, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" But can we really live as the lilies of the field do? How can we free ourselves from the earthly distractions that prevent us from being bold in our lives?

June and July/August—Act Boldly!

Finding My Boldness

Boldness in My Community

Boldness in the World

This summer we explore how each of us is called to be bold. What does that mean for us as individuals, for our faith communities, and for all of us as part of the global community? And how can we be energized by the examples of our bold sisters, both past and present?

Have you seen the new *LWT* brochure?

The new *LWT* brochure is available after April 1, 2005. A copy will be mailed in the spring packet in late April. If you have not yet seen it, be sure to ask your church office staff about it.

It is our hope that it will be displayed on church bulletin boards and in other prominent areas to lift up Women of the ELCA and *Lutheran Woman Today*. It is an easy way to bring the presence of your organization in front of members and visitors.

This beautiful promotional piece is filled with information that is useful for current subscribers as well as those who may not yet be familiar with the magazine.

If you are planning a meeting, convention, or other event where you would like to make the brochure available, we can help. Contact Women of the ELCA resource specialist Laura Barkenquast at 800-638-3522, ext. 2737.

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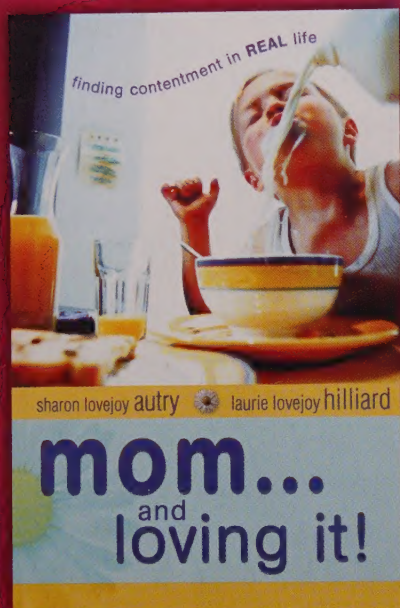
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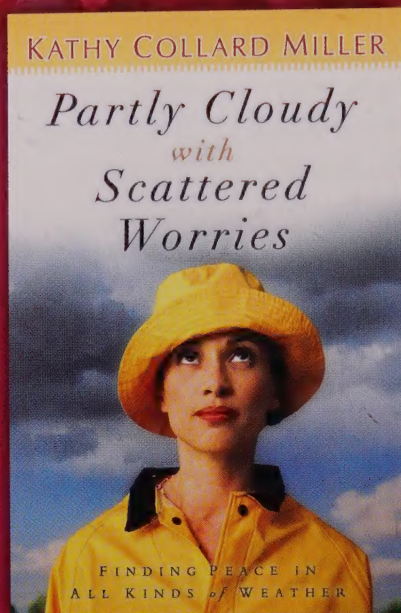


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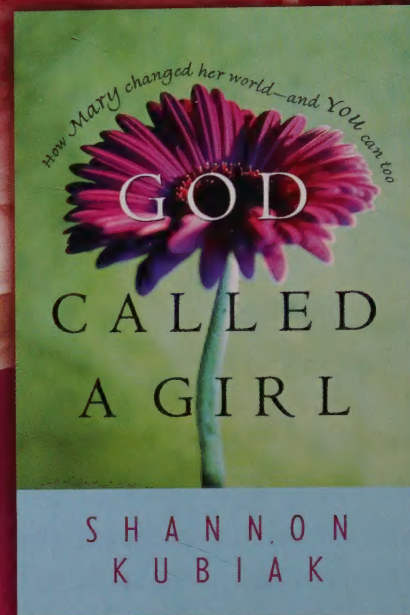


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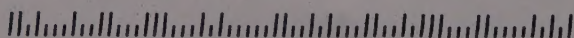
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